

# THE VERDICT IS LOVE

## CHAPTER ONE

**C**UTE, YOU'RE GETTING VERY cute, mister!" Kiri Adams chuckled to herself while folding the third note into neat squares.

"Did you know that you have a run in your stocking?" the latest communication informed her. "But don't worry, darling, nothing could detract from the perfection of those long, shapely legs."

Just like its predecessors, this newest message had been tucked into the soft imitation-leather upholstery of Kiri's chair. She'd known jury duty was going to cause her a lot of problems, but she'd never expected that one of them would be a teasing secret admirer.

Torn between laughter and an almost overwhelming impulse to jump up and find out just where the offending run was, Kiri instead forced herself to look out into the courtroom. There, her gaze rested on the adversaries in the plagiarism case. Each sat with their personal counsel, huddled like two football teams planning their strategies.

But while her eyes alternated between the young plaintiff and the distinguished defendant, Kiri's fingers were creasing each fold in the paper to razor sharpness, doubling it over and over until the note was as small as a pea.

This analogy quirked her full lips into a quick grin. One way to discourage her distracting pen pal would be with a regulation-size peashooter. Zinging the guy in the neck with his own words—

*Kiri!* a familiar voice silently admonished her. *When did you get to be so nasty?*

*Just kidding*, she hastily told her nagging conscience. *I'm not at my best this morning. I had no sleep last night and then I had to suffer through an hour's drive in smoggy Los Angeles traffic.*

Normally she wouldn't even think of retaliation. Yet, even if she were shameful enough to go through with her fantasy attack, Kiri had a problem.

She wasn't sure which of her fellow jurors to target.

And that was Mr. Burrow's fault, she decided. At the beginning of each court session, she filed in directly behind tall, rotund Mr. Burrow, whose enormous bulk effectively screened her view of the other jurors. The secretive writer must be taking advantage of the situation, sure that Kiri would be frustrated, no matter how vigilant she was in her attempts to identify him.

Even after an intensive analysis of her fellow jurors, Kiri was still left with at least three candidates for Mr. X. She had eliminated the seven other women who were on the jury with her. Mr. Burrow also seemed innocent. She watched him quite carefully, and he never had an opportunity to insert the folded paper into her chair. It was already there when they got to the seats.

Of the remaining three men, one was a distinguished-looking Mexican American with graying temples. Another was tall, dark, and boyishly attractive. He had a dreamy, preoccupied expression which softened his thin face.

The third possibility was the only incarnate Greek god Kiri had ever seen, though she had lived in Southern California—well known for its beautiful people—all her life.

The old cliché leaped to mind each time the man crossed her path or when she found her eyes wandering to him. Overworked as the phrase was, it fit him, and Kiri was in a unique position to judge how well it did. Accustomed to drawing very handsome men in her work as a commercial artist, she was all the more impressed—professionally impressed, she hastened to assure herself.

Like the expert she was, Kiri approved of the shock of tawny hair adorning his leonine head. She gave the highest marks to the golden amber of his long, narrow eyes. But what really lifted his face from merely gorgeous to heart-stopping was the long, noble line of his nose.

It was an echo of all the classic Greek statues Kiri had ever studied. Starting at the juncture of his well-formed eyebrows, it jutted straight, chiseled and perfect, to its termination just above a beautifully masculine mouth.

Kiri had gasped—inadvisably, thank heavens—when she saw him for the first time, two days ago. She wondered how a man like that could walk down the street safely without attracting, Pied Piper-like, an entourage of lust-crazed women wherever he went.

She had smiled at the image then, but after noting the continual stares of every other woman in the courtroom, including the attractive female judge, Kiri decided that this could very well be his lot in life.

Abruptly wondering if the dignified magistrate could read her thoughts, Kiri looked up guiltily at the bench to see if Judge Carrera had observed her lack of attention this morning. However, the worthy justice was intently listening to the young lawyer for the plaintiff present his opening arguments to the jury.

Temporarily shelving her investigation into "the case of the amorous note writer," Kiri forced herself to concentrate again on the plagiarism suit. It concerned growing crystals through a high-vacuum process, and the scientific data, which the plaintiff's attorney was now explaining to the courtroom, was really quite complex.

As he passed by the jury box, the handsome counselor stopped in front of Kiri, looking so intently into her eyes as he spoke that she dropped her gaze in confusion.

When she sought refuge in examining her fingers, Kiri noticed a dab of pastel green paint on her thumb, which had escaped her hasty shower that morning. Suddenly, the full force of Martin Collens's ultimatum on the telephone late last evening crashed over her again, and the lawyer's mellow voice was replaced by the memory of a far less attractive one.

"Kiri!" Martin's agitated, high-pitched whine had broken into her sleep-muddled brain at eleven P.M. "You'd better get that elegant bottom of yours in motion and wiggle over to the judge tomorrow. Convince him to let you off that jury. The fat's in the fire and we're all in deep—"

"Marty," she broke in, knowing that he was incapable of speaking a single sentence without a cliché or an expletive. "I can't drop out unless it's a personal crisis. And as for the judge, I doubt that my *derriere* would have the slightest effect on *her* decision. Why don't you take a pill for your ulcer, two for that high blood pressure, and then tell me just what's the problem. I thought we'd taken care of all the major disasters and were worried only about the minor ones."

"Yeah, but that was before our favorite fashion designer got his libido into high gear again. Jacques Goulart's decided to get married—for the fifth time—and his little cookie is just dying to go on a world cruise. Hell,

can you believe it, if he signs with us, the fool's actually going to honeymoon while we're launching the most expensive ad campaign in the history of men's wear!"

For once Kiri had to agree with the feisty adman. "It does sound like he's lost a few more pieces from his jigsaw puzzle. Giving us that crummy deadline to finish a complex presentation for his new line was ridiculous enough. But this—"

"That's why I'm calling you, sweetie. My *new* deadline for the presentation is Monday evening; *yours* is Sunday night, at the latest!" The squeak in his voice actually hurt her ears.

"Sunday? That's impossible, this is Thursday. Do you know how many sketches I'd have to finish by then? All that men's underwear. I'd have to work nonstop to get it done. No way," she protested.

"You can do it if you shuck the civic-pride pose, babe."

"Well, I can't. I'll have to figure out something else."

"You'd better, lover." His tone lost all pleasantness. "Or I'll be taking *you* to court for breach of contract. And we both know what your chances would be of doing anything important after that. You'd be lucky if they let you design the wrappers for toilet paper," he chuckled nastily.

"Why, you sawed-off, no-good, cliché-ridden, Napoleonic flack!" It was the best she could do and still keep her basically ladylike vocabulary intact.

"Yeah, I love you too, Kiri," he thundered. "See you at your place, eleven P.M. on Sunday. And by God, I want that swimwear painted in pastels."

If the situation were the least bit funny, Kiri might have laughed at Marty's demand. But it wasn't.

Unable to return to sleep, Kiri had worked until dawn, defying Marty by painting the pastels he had wanted for her latest drawings onto plastic overlays. She adamantly refused to place the soft color directly on the stark, deceptively simple lines of her charcoal-drawn figures.

The severe style was her trademark as a commercial artist. And it had been a very successful one too. If she hadn't coveted the prestigious assignment from Martin's firm, Kiri would have told the brash, insensitive account executive just what to do with his putrid-green ideas.

But his advertising agency was close to capturing the garment industry's premier account of the year. World-famous women's clothes designer, Jacques Goulart, was adding men's fashions to his fall collection, and Kiri would have killed to do the advertising artwork for him.

Homicide hadn't been necessary. Marty acknowledged her talent by going outside his own agency to use her free-lance company. His confidence that her work would attract the interest of the fickle buying public was scary and challenging, and it was also the highest compliment ever paid Kiri Adams and her four-year-old commercial art firm, Ad-Art.

Knowing that several million dollars in advertising would be allocated to the project gave her a knot in her stomach, whenever she thought about the responsibility.

Stifling a huge yawn, Kiri damned Marty for her sleepless night and valiantly fought to bring her thoughts back to the trial. She sat up straighter in her juror's chair and tried to concentrate on the ramifications of the complex scientific issues in the case. But she was still thoroughly distracted by her own worries.

Kiri didn't think that Marty could actually sue her if she didn't meet this new deadline. But he would "blackball" her, she had no doubt—he was that vindictive.

As a muscle spasm passed through her tightly clenched fingers, Kiri realized that she still held her secret admirer's message in her hand. Blindly staring up at the plaintiff's attorney when he again stopped in front of her, she recalled the series of increasingly more personal notes.

She had found the first one stuffed into her chair cushion when the whole jury had finally been empaneled yesterday, after lunch. The message had been short and sounded innocent—at first reading.

“Hi, Kiri, isn’t it a beautiful day? I’d like to sit next to you, but people would talk.”

Looking around curiously, she had waited for someone to acknowledge the note with a smile or glance. But no one owned up to the greeting. However, in the second communique, which she received later in the day after a break in the preliminary procedures, Kiri had been asked for a date.

“Honey, I promise not to say anything to you about this case if you have dinner with me. It will be the furthest thing from my mind.”

Maybe it was the grace of the masculine calligraphy, or a certain cheerful openness in the messages, but the notes had intrigued Kiri rather than frightening her. However, she hadn’t waited for the note writer to reveal himself when court had recessed yesterday afternoon. Instead, she had made for her apple-green Porsche at a run, needing to get home to work on the Goulart account.

But now, almost against her will, Kiri turned to look down the two rows of jurors, hoping that she could ferret out some telling reaction from somebody down the line. However, her eleven peers were engrossed in the lawyer’s statement—just as she should have been.

Yet, her eyes were drawn again to the ruggedly classic line of that haunting profile. Struggling to pull her gaze away from the man’s incredible features, Kiri was appalled when he suddenly turned and caught her inspecting him.

In his seat at the other end of the jury box, Shaun Stevens had felt the most incredible sensation a second ago; a warm, soft touch seemed to caress his cheek. He snapped his head around and collided with the vivid cornflower blue of Kiri Adams's gaze.

At last! He had been trying to catch her attention for three days now. It was ironic that as much as he hated strange females staring at him—or rather at his damned nose—the one woman whose notice he had desperately wanted had completely ignored him.

His mother had always said that she and his father had fallen in love at first sight. His own scoffing words came back to haunt him now. For it seemed that he had inherited that trait from his folks, double-strength.

The moment he had seen the red-haired, sapphire-eyed creature sitting in the first row of the jury box, he had known that she was the woman he had been searching for. But Kiri Adams obviously hadn’t been looking for him. The disdain on her face told Shaun that for some reason she had *hated* him on sight.

Sighing deeply, he nevertheless gave Kiri his biggest smile and a quick wink. Let her try to ignore that!

Turning abruptly away from the warm white grin, Kiri repressed a shudder. *No!* Never again! She remembered another beguiling smile, another beautifully put together man. The damage Paul Jordan had done to her heart and to her ego had taken years to fix.

While she had to face the fact that she would always be attracted to handsome men with muscles—that seemed to be a basic part of her psychological makeup—Kiri told herself she didn’t have to give in to those feelings.

For the last five years she hadn’t. Even though she met scores of handsome men in the course of her work, she had never accepted a date with one of them. Instead, she preferred to go out with men like the slim, dark juror. The day before, when she noticed him reading a thin book of poetry at lunch, she had almost decided that it was *he* who had penned the delightful notes.

The golden giant sitting next to him might have been gilded by an aureate California sun, but Kiri sincerely doubted he had the intelligence needed to compose the wicked little messages. And those huge hands couldn't have the subtle dexterity required to put words to paper with such obvious craft.

No, not him. But perhaps it was the older, graying man in front of him, who projected such a romantic Latin image.

Thinking back to the *voir dire* process used to question prospective jurors, Kiri tried to remember what she had learned about these three men. Because her name was near the top of the list of potential panelists, she had been one of the earliest to go through the interrogation and the first selected to hear the case.

Seated in the jury box, she had listened while the other eleven chairs were slowly filled. Initially, the questioning had been fascinating. But by the end of that first day Kiri had fully paid for the honor of being the first juror accepted. She knew all about the selection process, and a great deal more than she cared to concerning the beliefs and problems of the more than fifty people who had been questioned.

Ironically, now, when all those details would have helped her identify her mystery pen pal, she remembered only vague points about the other eleven finally chosen. A few names and occupations had stuck in her mind, but that was of little practical help.

Help? Boy, did she need help! Squirming restlessly in her seat, Kiri thought about the work ahead of her this weekend. She decided that when the afternoon court session was over, she would finalize the drawings she had already started. At lunchtime, she planned to contact the model she had been using, and re-engage him for the underwear sketches. If they worked continually on Saturday and Sunday, perhaps she could finish by Martin's deadline.

"I'll show that snake!" she muttered.

Having eliminated her business worries, at least in her mind, she was finally able to turn her full attention to the legal puzzle she was in the courtroom to help solve.

Without realizing it, Kiri had been unconsciously monitoring the opening remarks of the plaintiff's lawyer, Daniel Stern, all along. But now she had to listen with all her faculties, because the young, bearded attorney had just called his first witness, his own client.

After the man was sworn in, the questioning began. "Please state your full name," Counselor Stern requested.

"James Robert Howard," he replied nervously.

"Mr. Howard, what is your occupation?"

"I'm a full-time student, working on a Ph.D. in physics." The boyish-looking man shifted in the witness stand.

"Could you tell the jury what you are doing to earn your degree?" The lawyer indicated the box with a sweep of his hand.

"Well, all my requirements are finished, except for the oral exam on my thesis. It has to be defended before a panel of the faculty."

"What does this defense entail, Mr. Howard?"

"Oh, I have to demonstrate a broad knowledge of physics, and then the panel asks questions about the originality and viability of my own work."

"In other words, you have to establish that the research you did was your own, that the idea was original, and that the hypothesis you proposed was scientifically proved," his lawyer interpreted.

The defense attorney, Mr. Barson, was on his feet. "Your Honor, I object—he's leading the witness. The counsel for the plaintiff is putting words, lots of them, into the mouth of his client."

"Mr. Stern, perhaps you should ask Mr. Howard to tell us in his own words what you just summarized for us," Magistrate Carrera advised wryly.

With a charming grin that was directed to the entire jury, but which somehow zeroed in on Kiri for long seconds, Daniel Stern then asked a series of questions that elicited the same information.

And so, the morning passed. Counselor Stern continued the unsettling practice of pacing in front of the jury and then suddenly stopping before Kiri whenever he made a particularly brilliant point. Each time she found herself being appraised with probing intensity by a pair of warm, intelligent brown eyes.

A short break was called at ten-thirty, after the more technical information was presented. When Kiri got back from a walk to stretch her muscles, another precisely folded note was peeking out from the crack between her armrest and the chair cushion. She casually slipped it into her skirt pocket as the proceedings began again.

"All right, Mr. Howard," the plaintiff's attorney said. "Just before the break you told us that you had developed an original process that would grow crystals of such purity that they would revolutionize the industry. Is that correct?"

"They will, as soon as they can be manufactured. So far, the technique is nominally theoretical, but there's no doubt it will work. Everyone agrees with the soundness of the theory. In fact, I've been assured that my experiments will be included on an upcoming mission to the International Space Station," James Howard enthused.

"What will be the result, then, Mr. Howard?"

"I don't understand." A line grooved his forehead.

"I mean, of what benefit will its success be to *you*, personally?" he amended.

"Why, I guess that I'll be very rich," was the matter-of-fact reply.

The courtroom broke into approving laughter at his offhanded assurance of great wealth. One deep growl of a chuckle penetrated the humorous hubbub, and Kiri automatically looked for its source among the jurors. Its origin was in the massive chest of their very own pagan deity.

The attractive sound pulled Kiri's reluctant mouth into a wider grin. At that moment, the deity turned. His amber eyes met hers, and the long upper lip curved seductively over their shared amusement. Only when he raised a wicked eyebrow did Kiri's head snap back to front center.

Judge Carrera pounded for order as the laughter in the room continued. "Quiet, the Court will have quiet!"

Kiri was thankful for the banging of the gavel. It would hide the sound of her thumping heart.

*For goodness' sake, girl, he's just a man. There really aren't any ancient gods around*, she told herself. He must have lots of faults. But none came readily to mind.

As the room regained its collective dignity, Counselor Stern continued. "You mean that you own the patent on the process?"

"Not yet. I want to fulfill all the requirements of the patent law, most important, to prove the procedure is entirely mine."

"And is it?" Stern asked quietly.

"Absolutely! From conception to completion I did all of the work, all of the experiments, all of the calibrations," he claimed vehemently.

"Then what is the problem, Mr. Howard? Why are we here?" the lawyer asked as he paced in front of the witness box. His hands were gripped behind his back, and a pulse of tension beat in his cheek.

"Because six months ago Dr. Calvin Cairns published an article in *Crystallography Today* in which he proposed a process exactly like mine. He claims he developed it a year before I sent in my patent application." The young man's voice cracked with emotion.

The opening arguments had hinted at this, but the room buzzed with anticipation nonetheless.

"Are you saying that Dr. Cairns developed the same technique months earlier, and that you, therefore, have no claim to originality or ownership? Is that correct?"

"No!" Howard jumped to his feet. "That's not what I'm saying at all. I mean that he somehow *stole* my work and is trying to take credit for everything I've done."

His attorney restrained the young man as he tried to bolt the witness box. "All right, Mr. Howard. Now, just relax. We understand your agitation."

Before Daniel Stern could continue, Judge Carrera called for the lunch break. She turned to the jury and formally admonished them. "Ladies and gentlemen, I must remind you that while at lunch, or in any place you come into contact with one another, you are not to discuss this case in any manner whatsoever. Nor are you to talk about it with family or friends.

"You may speak to one another, but there must be no reference to what happens in this courtroom until the case has been completely presented and you have been charged with its determination. Am I understood?"

Her dark eyes surveyed the group; each member nodded as the intimidating gaze swept along the two rows.

"Very well, we will resume at one-thirty."

"All rise," the uniformed bailiff directed.

Everybody in the courtroom got to their feet and waited for the judge to exit.

Kiri nonchalantly wove her way through the crowd. Sedate and calm to any watchful eye, no one would have known how she longed to pull the square of paper out of her pocket. It burned there against her thigh as if made from the highest grade of combustible material.

Only when she was safely in the ladies' lounge did she remove the missive and scan its meaning.

It was far longer than all the other communications. Its content was so personal that heat rose throughout her body, right from the core of her femininity—where its author had intended it to be understood.

The note began, "I wanted to be original, but five hundred years ago, John Skelton wrote just what I felt two days ago, when I first gazed upon the auburn fall of your hair and the sapphire beauty of your eyes."

*How shall I report all the goodly sort*

*Of her features clear*

*That hath none earthly peer?*

*The favour of her face ennuwed all with grace,*

*Comfort, pleasure and solace.*

*Mine heart doth so embrace,*

*And so hath ravished me her to behold and see,*

*That in wordes plain I cannot me refrain*

*To look on her again:*

*Alas, what should I feign?*

*It were a pleasant pain*

*With her aye to remain.*

As Kiri stood in a preoccupied daze in the lounge, a mysterious little smile played at the corners of her full mouth. But the winsome curve straightened immediately. *What nonsense.* She chided the flame that glowed in her body and she scolded the slight churning excitement that had taken over her stomach. *It doesn't happen this way. I just need something to eat—or maybe I'm coming down with the flu!*

Shaking her head, she denied the nagging excitement running through her nerve endings. The last time she had felt similar quiverings had been with Paul Jordan, and look where that had gotten her.

Resolutely, Kiri threw the beautifully crafted love poem into the trash and fished out a business address book from the depths of her purse. It listed the professional models she used in her work. Tom Kochinski's phone rang eight times before his answering service responded.

"Mr. Kochinski is out at the moment, may I take a message?" the nasal, impersonal voice asked Kiri.

"This is Ad-Art, Ms. Adams speaking. I need to talk to Mr. Kochinski right away. I have an important assignment for him." She tapped her foot impatiently as the operator searched her files for Tom's instructions.

"Miss Adams, I'm sorry, Mr. Kochinski flew to Detroit yesterday for his grandmother's funeral. He won't be back until Wednesday. Do you want to leave a message?"

"No, oh, no!" Kiri cried out more for her own loss of an excellent model than in sympathy for the man.

She severed the connection and tried to locate a suitable alternative. The last drawings she had to do were of high-fashion men's underwear. Their scanty lines required absolute perfection in the male who modeled them.

Mentally checking her list of regulars, Kiri came up with four possibilities. Two were also out of town—on photo assignments. Dion, unfortunately, had just been in a motorcycle accident and had broken his leg. Russell Green was somewhere, but Kiri couldn't locate him. Not even the leads his girlfriend provided were helpful.

Defeated for the moment, Kiri left the lounge, heading for the diner where she had eaten yesterday.

Almost out of the Federal Courthouse, she abruptly changed direction and ran back to the ladies' room. She was just lifting the rumpled but beautifully scripted note from the wastepaper bin, when a startled cleaning attendant entered with her cart.

Kiri replaced the paper she had strewn around the floor. Holding up her message, she explained, "My grocery list."